

# New Directions in Jewish Theology in America

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Theology has not been the creative forte of the Jewish people throughout most of the last century. We have been too busily engaged in the process of surviving to have had the energy to devote to sustained religious reflection. We have struggled to find our way as latecomers into modernity, to establish ourselves on new shores and amid unfamiliar cultural landscapes. We have survived an encounter with evil incarnate that cost us the lives of fully a third of the Jewish people, including an untold number of thinkers, teachers, and their students, Hasidic masters and disciples, many of whom in better times might have helped us to figure out the puzzles of Jewish theology. For the past fifty years the Jewish people as a body politic has been fully and single-mindedly engaged in the task of reconstruction, in our case meaning above all building the State of Israel as a secure national home for the Jewish people and securing emigration rights for Jews who chose to go there. Besides these monumental undertakings, all else seemed to pale.

Nevertheless, we have hardly been bereft of theologians and religious thinkers. In recent memory there have been two bursts of theological creativity especially worthy of note. One began in the late 1960s, when such thinkers as Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein, Arthur Cohen, and others began to integrate the lessons of the Holocaust into Jewish religious parlance. The other has taken place over the course of the past two or three decades and has more to do with both the recovery of religious language and the ways it may, must, or may not be updated in order to carry Jewry into the rather uncharted waters that lie ahead in what most seem to be-

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This essay was originally presented on November 7, 1993, at the Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

lieve is a radically new era in the history of the Jewish people. Here the names of David Hartman, Irving Greenberg, Judith Plaskow, Arthur Waskow, Neil Gillman, and Eugene Borowitz all come to mind. Quite a rogues' gallery of thinkers for a people too busy to theologize!

But this latter crop of thinkers appears precisely—and hardly accidentally—at a time when I believe the Jewish people are ready for theology and, indeed, need it urgently. I breathe deeply, add a *barukh ha-shem*, and note that nowhere in the world are there persecuted Jews who need our help. With the possible exceptions of small communities in Syria and Iran, there is no one through whom North American Jews can live a vicarious Jewish life or for whose sake they can postpone thinking about the nature of their own Jewishness “because there are more urgent things to do.”

Indeed thinking about our own Jewishness is precisely what we Jews need most to do. We need to define our goals for the continuity of Jewish life. What do we mean by a Jewish future in America? How much of Judaism, what sort of religious life, what kind of community can we imagine existing several generations into the future? How much of assimilation can we tolerate and still survive as a distinct culture? How will we believe in our Judaism, and what will be the important Jewish experiences we will share with our children? We need to create a vision of a contemporary Judaism that will attract the coming generations and articulate a meaning deep and powerful enough to help us withstand the tremendous assimilatory powers by which we are surrounded. If there is to be a future for Jewish life on this continent, I believe that the theologian will now have a great deal to do with it.

The following remarks are offered from a particular theological point of view; I do not present them as an objective description of a historical phenomenon called Jewish theology. They are, if you will, a theologian's rather than a historian's definition of the Jewish theologian's task. I see myself as a theologian in the tradition of an East European school of Jewish mystical theology, itself the heir of the kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions. The chief figures in this school (here identified as such for the first time) in the twentieth century were Judah Loeb Alter of Ger, author of the *Sefat Emet*; Abraham Isaac Kook, chief rabbi of Palestine during the British mandate; Hillel Zeitlin, teacher and martyr of the Warsaw ghetto; and my own teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel.

This school is defined by a sense that the starting point of theological reflection is the cultivation of inwardness and the opening of the soul to God's presence throughout the world. The members of this group may all

be characterized as experientialist mystics. Each of them celebrates inward religious experience, his own as well as that provided by literary or historic example, as the primary datum with which the theologian has to work. Each in one way or another also points toward an ultimately unitive view of religious truth, a unity that transcends the borders of particularisms. They are all engaged in a search for Jewish expression of transcendent oneness, such as might "broaden the bounds of the holy" to overcome even such seemingly intimate distinctions as those between the holy and the profane or between the divine, the natural or worldly, and the human realms.

This group of thinkers also has some other key elements in common. All are awed by the constantly renewing presence of God within the natural world; they may in this sense be said to share a "Creation-centered" theological perspective. Their perspective is deeply immanentist: God is to be known by seeing existence through its "innermost point," by attaining an inward vision, or by addressing the questions of "depth theology." A certain crucial veil needs to be lifted in order to enable the mind to achieve a more profound (and essentially intuitive) view of reality. Their religion is in this sense universalistic, relating in the first instance to a divine reality that is not limited to the particular Jewish setting. Within the group there is an evolution to be traced on this question, from the *Sefat Emet*, still living within the Hasidic/mythical universe that sees only the Jewish soul as potentially aware of divinity, to the much greater universalism of a Heschel, who had full respect for the spiritual legitimacy of non-Jewish religious life.

These East European spiritual teachers are all thoroughly comfortable with their Judaism, a garment that is completely natural to them. None of them is primarily a "defender" of the tradition, nor are any of them interested in proving their own orthodoxy to others. They all see halacha as a natural part of the way Jews live, but they do not turn primarily to halachic texts as their source of spiritual nurturance. In this way they are to be distinguished from another group of East European religious figures, the pan-halachists of the Lithuanian school, who proclaim halacha itself to be the only authentic expression of Judaism.

This group of Jewish mystical or experientialist theologians is also to be distinguished in the broadest terms from the German-Jewish theological developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The East Europeans published chiefly in Hebrew, secondarily in Yiddish, until Heschel brought their insights to America in expanded English translation. The

German-Jewish theological enterprise was conducted entirely in the German language. The difference, perhaps seemingly a superficial one, is related to two very major divergences:

1. The East Europeans wrote for people who knew Judaism deeply from within. There was no need here to explain basic Jewish terms, beliefs, attitudes. Even kabbalistic ideas, presented in a new way by Kook or Zeitlin, would fall on well-attuned ears. The German Jewish enterprise was a highly self-conscious one, always seeking to discover and describe the "essence" or "true spirit" of Judaism and explain it to an audience of non-Jewish as well as uninformed Jewish readers.
2. To do so convincingly (and there is much of apologetics in the air of German-Jewish thought), Judaism must be described and defended in terms set by the canon of German philosophical thought in the period, primarily Immanuel Kant and G. F. W. Hegel. Even Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, who were in open existential rebellion against the overdomination of systematic philosophy, had their agendas largely set by the needs of that rebellion, by being overtly against Kant, as personified by Hermann Cohen, or Hegel, the subject of young Rosenzweig's doctoral dissertation and the address of the first portion of his *Star of Redemption*. The East Europeans, by contrast, were steeped deeply in the premodern Jewish religious sources and their classical idiom. When they did turn to such modern thinkers as Nietzsche or Bergson, they did so out of a sensed affinity between these writers and their own Jewish sources.

I begin my remarks with this excursus on spiritual lineage partly because I want to make it clear that I see theology as a significant undertaking only in a devotionalist context, that is, a context where prayer (in the broadest sense), a cultivation of interiority, and awareness of divine presence in all of life are given primacy. As this may be considered a somewhat odd or off-beat position among contemporary Jews, I begin by emphasizing its historic roots. In a broader sense, the views I articulate may be called neo-Hasidic. I believe that postmodern Jews' recovery of the kabbalistic-Hasidic tradition is a decisive event in our ongoing spiritual history, one that should have a great impact upon the future of Jewish theology.

Bearing this legacy in mind, I shall attempt that which the tradition in its wisdom so thoroughly avoids: a definition of Jewish theology and its task.

*Each Jewish theology is a religious attempt to help the Jewish people understand the meaning of Jewish life and Jewish existence out of the store of texts, symbols, and historical experiences that are the shared inheritance of all Jews.*

This definition seeks to emphasize several key points. It begins by understanding theology as a “religious” undertaking. This point is far from obvious, especially in a world where theology too often dresses itself in academic garb and seeks a borrowed legitimacy from philosophy or social science. By “religious” in this context, I mean to say that theology emerges from living participation in the life of the faith community. It seeks to give expression in the language of that community to the essentially ineffable experience of divinity and to articulate a series of beliefs around the relationships of God, world, and person. (In the case of Judaism, there is added to this universal triad a second specifically Jewish three: God, Torah, and the Jewish people.)

In order to do this, theology must have recourse to language. Herein lies the first of many tensions that characterize the theological enterprise: the mystic knows God mostly in silence. Surely the deep well of inner awareness in which the divine is to be found reaches far beyond the grasp of words or concepts. Both personal experience and kabbalistic tradition confirm this. Knowing full well the inadequacy of words and the mental constructs they embody, the theologian has no choice but to become articulate. In this we are heirs to both the prophet and the mystical teacher who rail against their inability to refrain from speaking. We continue to rail, and continue to speak.

Our speaking is saved from *utter* inadequacy by our tradition of sacred speech. God speaks the world into being, according to our Torah, an act that is repeated each day, or perhaps even each moment, in the ongoing renewal of creation. We know that such divine speech is not in our human language, nor is the cosmic speech-act anything quite like our own. Nevertheless, the claim that the God we worship is a God of words is of value as we seek to use language to speak about the sacred. Our prayer book introduces each day’s verbal worship by blessing God, “who spoke and the world came to be.” Prayer is the bridge between the abstract notion of divine speech and the use of human words to speak of God. Let us say it in the language of grammar: the divine first-person use of speech, God’s own “I am,” is usually inaccessible to us except in rare moments. Our third-person voice in theologizing—“God is”—rings hollow and inadequate. These are brought closer by our willingness to use speech in the second person—

the saying of “You” in prayer, our response to the divine “you” we feel addressed to us—which redeems speech for us and brings the divine into the world of language.

This clearly means that theology is dependent upon prayer. Prayer is a primary religious activity, a moment of opening the heart either to be filled with God’s presence or to cry out at divine absence. Theology comes later, the mind’s attempt to articulate and understand something that the heart already knows. In defining theology as a “religious” activity, I mean to say that it grows out of a rich and textured life of prayer. The theologian’s prayer life, which may be as filled with questioning, doubt, and challenge as it is with submission and praise, is the essential nurturer of religious thinking.

In Jewish terms, theologizing is part of the mitzvah of knowing God, listed by Maimonides as first among the commandments. Knowledge of God is the basis of both worship and ethics, according to many of the Jewish sages. The term *da’at* or knowledge, bears within it a particularly rich legacy of meaning. It is best translated “awareness,” the intimate and consciousness-transforming knowledge that all of being, including the human soul, is infused with the presence of the One. This *da’at*, sometimes compared in the sources to the knowledge with which Adam “knew” his wife Eve, is far more than credence to a set of intellectual propositions. It is a knowing whose roots extend back in the Tree of Life, not just to the Tree of Knowledge. We know God out of a thirst that fills our whole being. Religious knowledge, not at all the same as “information about religion,” never comes in response to mere intellectual curiosity.

But the language the Jewish theologian speaks is not one of words alone. The traditions of Israel are filled with speech-acts of a transversal sort. These are epitomized by the sounding of the shofar, described by some sources as a wordless cry that reaches to those places (in the heavens? within the self? in the Self?) where words cannot penetrate. The same may be said of all the sacred and mysterious silent acts of worship: the binding of tefillin, the waving of the *lulav*, the eating of matzoth. All of these belong to the silent heart of the Jewish theological vocabulary. Each mitzvah, say the kabbalists, is a half-hidden way of pronouncing God’s name. All this is part, indeed the very heart, of *language*.

In defining Jewish theology as an “attempt to help the Jewish people,” I mean to say that the theologian has an active and committed relationship to the community. A Jewish theologian is a theologian who works with the Jewish people, not just with the symbolic vocabulary of the Jewish tradi-

tion. There is no Judaism without Jews, and that is no mere tautology. To be a Jewish theologian, especially in an age when the very future of our existence is threatened, is to accept the value of Jewish continuity and to direct one's efforts toward the building of a Jewish future. This does not mean that theology is to become the handmaiden of survivalism or that particular theological ideas are to be judged on their value for Jewish survival. The prophets hardly limited themselves in this way, nor should we. But it does mean that the theologian speaks out of the midst of a living community and addresses himself or herself in the primary sense to that community of Jews. If there are other masters to be served, as there always are (I think of such masters as pluralism, consistency, scholarly objectivity, political integrity, and so forth), let us remember that the Jewish people and its needs should come near the head of the line.

Here again I must refer to the particular tradition out of which I speak. In this tradition, Jewish theology has passed only in the last two generations from the hands of rebbes to those of their less-defined modern successors. The legacy of the Hasidic master is not yet forgotten here. He may be characterized as a latter-day descendent of the Platonic philosopher-king. Drawn by his own inclination to dwell exclusively in the upper realms of mystical devotion, he is forced by communal responsibilities to dwell "below," amid his people, and concern himself with their welfare. Cleaving fast to both realms at once, he thus becomes a pole or channel between heaven and earth. While the contemporary theologian should stay far from the pretense and pomposity that often result from such exaggerated claims of self-importance, he or she would do well to imitate the grave sense of communal as well as spiritual responsibility, and the link between these two, that went with the mantle of those who "said Torah." We too are saying Torah; in a certain sense, we bring Torah into being.

Jewish theology seeks to understand "the meaning of human life and Jewish existence." The questions faced by theology are universal. It exists in order to address itself to the essential human quest for meaning; while nurtured from the wellsprings of tradition, it grows most vigorously in the soil of personal religious quest. It wants to address issues of life and death, our origins in Creation, and the purpose of existence itself. Its answers will come in Jewish language, to be sure, and hopefully in rich and undiluted Jewish language. But it takes its place as a part of the human theological enterprise and is healthily nourished today as in all ages by contact with the best in philosophical, religious, and scientific thinking throughout the world. The American Jewish theologian who understood *this* best was

Mordecai M. Kaplan. He developed a theology in response to the finest Western social thought of his day, much as his German-Jewish counterparts did in response to idealist philosophy. A Jewish theology for today must stand in dialogue—mutual and unapologetic dialogue—with the best of theological understanding of religion, science, and the humanities in our own contemporary world.

Alongside its universal concerns, Jewish theology will also have to turn itself to the particular, seeking out the meaning of distinctive Jewish existence and the special contribution that the Jewish people has to offer. We have just lived through the most terrible age of martyrdom in Jewish history, and ours is a time when being a Jew can still mean the potential sacrificing of one's children's lives so that our people may live. At the same time, our community suffers terrible losses due to assimilation and indifference. In the face of this reality, the would-be theologian in our midst must offer us some reason why the continuation of our existence is religiously vital, even at such a terrible price. To do anything less would betray the trust we as a community place in the theologian. The Jewish theologian should have something to say to the large number of Jews, including many of our deepest seekers and most sensitive religious souls, who have turned away from Judaism and sought their spiritual nourishment elsewhere. To these Jews we should not offer condemnation—their souls are truly “babes captive among the heathen,” to use a halachic phrase. Nor should we seek to “convince” them by vain arguments that Judaism is “better” or “more true” than other religions. Rather we should open to them an experiential path to return home. The Jewish theologian as one who articulates religious experience should not forget this audience.

“Texts, symbols, and historical experiences” are the quarry out of which a contemporary Jewish theology is hewn. We are a tradition and a community shaped by and devoted to a text. In the primary sense, “text” refers here to the written Torah, read and completed each year by Jews in an ever-renewing cycle of commitment. Whatever the origins of that text, the Jewish religious community has accepted it as holy. It may no longer stand as the authoritative word of a commanding God, but it remains the most essential sanctum of the Jewish people, a source of guidance, wisdom, and ancient truth. Our relationship to it may at times include protest and rebellion along with love and devotion. But it remains our Torah, and we remain its Jews. We can no more reject it and spiritually remain Jews than the fish can reject water, to use a classic image, or than the mature adult can reject his or her own legacy of memory, one that inevitably includes both joy and pain.



Many of our most important sources are written in the form of commentaries to this text. These the theologian must study, seeking to add his or her contemporary voice to this tradition. Here the Aggadic strand is particularly important. Jewish theology in its most native form is narrative theology. It tells our story. The theologian was originally one who “told the tale”—that of Creation, of Exodus, of Abraham and Isaac, or of Ruth and Naomi—and subtly put it into a distinctive theological framework. This method is ours to study and continue, as is amply demonstrated by the widespread renewal of midrashic writing in recent decades, a great sign of health within Jewish theological creativity. The contemporary Jewish theologian could do no better than to retell the tale or tell some new tales in his or her own way. Much of the best of Jewish theology in the twentieth century has been written by poets and novelists. I think of Paul Célan, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Jacob Glatstein; of S. Y. Agnon, Franz Kafka, I. B. Singer, and Elie Wiesel; these offer significant humbling to those of us who call ourselves theologians.

Works of ancient Aggadah were reshaped by the kabbalists within their own systematic framework to create a profound sort of mystic speech. Study of this Aggadic-kabbalistic tradition and the search for ways to adapt it to contemporary usage is a key task of Jewish theology. The old Aggadic-homiletic tradition is reopened once again within Hasidism. Study of the creative use made of traditional sources by the Hasidic masters will serve as another important paradigm for contemporary efforts. The vast literature of Hebrew theological and moral treatises, a genre almost completely neglected other than by historical research, should also be important to the theologian. These too should be part of “text” in its broadest sense, as should be the artistic and musical creations of many generations and varied Jewish communities throughout the ages. All of them belong to what I mean by “text.”

I have already mentioned symbols as forms of silent religious speech. Here I would like to digress in order to add a reflection on the power of religious symbolism as constituted in the language of the kabbalah. The kabbalists taught of the ten *sefirot*, primal manifestations of the endless One that encompasses all of being. Each of these ten is represented in kabbalistic language by one or more conventional terms and by a host of symbolic images. A certain face of the divine reality, to take one example, is conventionally called *hesed*, or grace. But in kabbalistic writings it is often referred to by such symbol terms as *morning*, *milk*, *Abraham*, *the right hand*, *the priest*, *love*, *south*, *lion (on the divine throne)*, *myrtle twig*, and a host of other names. Each of these terms, when used in the kabbalists’ symbolic reconstruction

of the Hebrew language (for we are speaking of nothing less) has the same referent. What the kabbalist has in effect created is a series of symbolic clusters, and when any member of a cluster is invoked, all the others are brought to mind as well. I call this reconstruction, not deconstruction, of language. The clusters make for powerful new meanings of words and patterns of association. Meaning is thus greatly amplified and broadened, though within contours that remain quite clear to one who plays well at this symbolic keyboard. Kabbalah makes for an enrichment and amplification of meaning, not its breakdown.

It is particularly important that each of these clusters contains elements of both classically Jewish and *natural* symbols. The Bible saw the variety and splendor of creation as the great testament to God's handiwork. But nature was to a degree desacralized in later Judaism, which viewed study, religious practice, and reflection on Jewish sacred history as the chief areas where one should seek contact with God. The kabbalist greatly reinvigorates Jewish language by this symbolic resacralization of the natural world. Rivers, seas, seasons, trees, and heavenly bodies are all participants in the richly textured description or "mapping" of divinity, which is the kabbalist's chief task.

Jewish theology needs to find a way to repeat this process, to "redeem" the natural for our theology and to bring the religious appreciation of the natural world into central focus as an object of Jewish concern. We need to do this first and foremost for our own souls. We need to lead our religious parlance out of the ghetto that allows for the sacrality only of what is narrowly ours and allow ourselves to see again, to "lift up our eyes to the hills," to "raise our eyes to heaven and see who created these," opening ourselves anew to the profound sacred presence that fills all of being. We also need to do this as members of the human religious community, all of which is charged in our day with creating a religious language that will reroot us in our natural surroundings and hopefully lead to a deeper and richer appreciation—and therefore to less abuse and neglect—of our natural earthly heritage. In this area Jewish theology is lagging far behind the Jews, many of whom take leading roles in the movement for preservation of the planet but with little sense that Judaism has anything to offer to these efforts.

The Judaism of Kook, Zeitlin, and Heschel is one that had begun to undertake this task. All of them saw this world in its variety and splendor as nothing less than the multicolored garb of divine presence. For fifty years Judaism has, however, turned in other directions. Shaken to our root by the experience of the Holocaust, our religious language took the predictable route of self-preservation by turning inward, setting aside this universalist

agenda as nonessential to our own survival. We needed in those postwar years to concentrate fully on our own condition, first in outcry and later in the rebuilding of our strength, especially through the creation of Israel and its cultural and religious life. Now that time has begun to work its inevitable healing on both mind and body, we find ourselves somewhat shocked and frightened by the rapid pace of this turn inward and the narrowing effect it has had on Jewish thought. In the face of these, we find ourselves turning back to the interrupted work of our nascent Jewish universalists and theologians of radical immanence, knowing that we need to resume their task.

The impact of these history-making decades is not lost, however. In adding “historical experiences” to the texts and symbols that comprise the sources of our Jewish learning, I mean to say that there has been a profound change wrought on the Jewish psyche by the events of this century. We are no longer able to ignore the lessons of our own historical situation, as Jews sought to do for so many years. Emancipation, Zionism, and persecution have all joined forces to drive us from that ahistorical plateau where the Jewish people once thought they dwelt in splendid isolation. We need a theology that knows how to learn from history, from our role among the nations, from our experiences both as victim and as conqueror. Without the ability to handle these real-life situations with moral integrity and strength, our Judaism of texts and symbols will become mere cant.

Finally, we need to insist in our definition that all these are “the shared inheritance of all Jews.” Nothing in our tradition belongs to an exclusive group within the Jewish people. This includes groups defined by religious viewpoint; by national origin, by gender, and by all the rest. The legacy of Hasidism is too important to be left to the Hasidim alone; Sephardic ballads and Yemenite dance no longer belong to the descendants of those groups alone. Words like *halacha* or *yeshiva* should not be left to the Orthodox; they are the inheritance of all Israel. So are observances like dwelling in the sukkah, bathing in the *mikveh*, and dancing with the Torah. None of the legacy belongs exclusively to men, and none of it exclusively to women.

All of this should be sufficiently obvious not to need stating here, but that is unfortunately not the case. The theologian should be committed to the entirety of the Jewish people, more than to any subgroup or denomination within it. This will mean an ongoing devotion to the endless task of educating Jews—all kinds of Jews—and bringing them home to their roots in the people Israel. It is both a mitzvah and a privilege to participate in this task. For having a key role in it, the theologian should be grateful.

